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CIA chief says reporters were hired

By William Ringle
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WASHINGTON — During a clash with editors over the use of reporters as agents, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency revealed Thursday that three U.S. correspondents had agreed to be covert CIA informants.

Although Adm. Stansfield Turner said that as the three situations had unfolded the CIA had not needed the reporters, a number of the editors remained upset.

Nor were they mollified by his assurance that a 3-year-old CIA directive requires his specific approval before news reporters "in very exceptional situations" would be used in CIA operations.

A number of the editors, including New York Times Executive Editor A. M. Rosenthal, were surprised and some were even incredulous that the CIA had announced such a rule.

Turner said that he had changed a policy set by former CIA Director George Bush that U.S. correspondents would not be used as agents. House records show that Turner did describe the new policy publicly on April 20, 1978, at a hearing of the House Permanent Select Subcommittee on Intelligence's oversight committee.

Turner's exchange with the editors occurred during a question-and-answer session after he spoke to the convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Use of reporters as a cover for CIA information-gathering was disclosed in post-Watergate investigations of U.S. intelligence.

Rosenthal and others contend that if such a practice were followed, even with the limitation Turner imposed, a host country could never be sure whether a U.S. correspondent was a CIA agent or a bona fide news reporter. It would "cast into doubt the ethical and professional status of every foreign correspondent," Rosenthal argued.

It's of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, which prohibits government interference with freedom of the press, said Editor Richard D. Smyser of the Oak Ridge (Tenn.) Oak Ridger, moderator of a panel that questioned Turner.

But Turner could not comprehend their attitude.

"I'd be ashamed, if I were you, to have to have a law to protect my ethics," he told the editors.

As for the freedom argument, he said: "What you're saying to me is that if you accept an assignment from me to get some information that might be very vital to our country, you've lost your freedom. I don't understand that. I really don't."

"You're sort of saying that if you accept a request to serve your country — maybe for money, maybe not — that you're no longer free ... If you slant the news because you're on our payroll, that's bad, you aren't free. But it's your choice whether a relationship with us, reporting information to us, would somehow profane your work. And you must have relationships with all kinds of other organizations besides ours and hopefully you maintain your freedom there. I'm sorry, I don't understand the connection you make between serving your country and being free. I think you can do both."

Turner said the three correspondents he had enlisted were "perfectly agreeable" to work with the CIA, but that "the circumstances did not mature in the way we had expected" and "we backed off."

Asked if he would continue the practice in special circumstances, he replied that "I think a lot of correspondents are patriotic enough to do this ... and help their government." And they have "unique access that can be of great value to us."

Later, in a talk to the ASNE, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said he had a "gut feeling" against using journalists as CIA agents, but he had not yet made up his mind whether it